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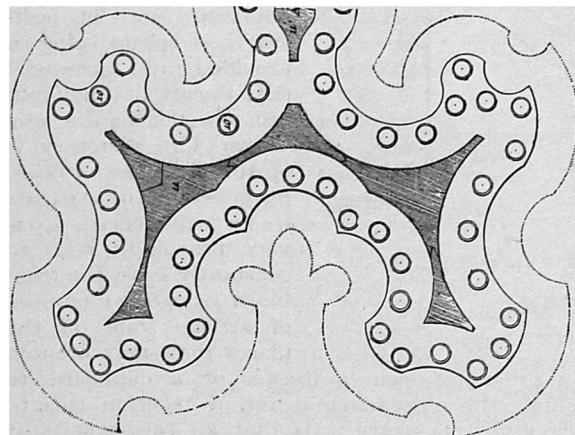
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ON DINING TABLES.

BY THEODORE CHILD.

IN a previous article on the dining-room, I said something about French notions concerning cookery and the tables, yet I feel that no apology is needed for returning to the subject. So true is that maxim of Paulus Aemilius, after his glorious expedition into Greece, when he was to entertain the Roman people, "that there was equal skill required to bring an army into the field and to set forth a magnificent entertainment, since the one was as far as possible to annoy your enemy, and the other to pleasure your friend." In the art of feasting, *l'art des festins* as the gastronomic writers of the XVIIth century call it, the arrangement of the table is as important as the preparation of the food itself, for a good dinner badly served is a good dinner spoiled.

The question of table service in its decorative aspect is too vast to be treated here as a whole; we will content ourselves for the present with saying something about tables. The modern dining tables are invariably square, round, oblong, with rounded ends or occasionally in the



PLAN OF TABLE.

form of a horse shoe, in which latter case the table is composite, that is to say, it is made up of several tables in juxtaposition. Generally the modern table errs on the side of too great solidity. The first quality of a table obviously is that it should be firm upon its legs, but there is no reason for exaggerating strength into clumsiness, and even the space necessary for lodging the complicated screw and telescope arrangements now employed for the purpose of enlarging the table at will, cannot excuse the massiveness that has for many years been in vogue in this article of furniture. Furthermore the dining table of carved oak, mahogany or rosewood is a useless luxury; the ornamentation is misplaced and the richness of the material is lost, inasmuch as the table is always covered with a cloth. The floral decoration, the monumental center pieces, and a dozen other details are open to severe criticism from the point of view of appropriateness and the convenience of the guests. The service, above all things, is open to criticism when, as is generally the case, it is executed by waiters who approach the diner treacherously from behind, pass the plate over his left shoulder, and occasionally deposit a splash of sauce or gravy on his coat sleeve. My experience of dining in London and Paris has led me to the conclusion that with all our civilization and all our refinement we have still to learn in the art of feasting.

Curiously enough, this question of the serving of feasts has not occupied the attention of many writers. Books on the duties of the *maitre d'hôtel* and on the practical presentation and serving of feasts are so rare that they can scarcely be said to exist at all; the matter has only been

touched upon incidentally in the regular treatises on the culinary art which are themselves rare, for, as the gastronomic poet, Dr. William King, says:

Tho' cooks are often men of pregnant wit,
Thro' nice ness of their subject, few have writ.

Nevertheless, there is something to be learned from a rapid historical study of the subject, and not unfrequently we shall find that our remote predecessors understood comfort in certain things better than ourselves.

Let us begin with the definition of a table, which is, according to Dr. Johnson, "a horizontal surface raised above the ground used for meals and other purposes." Roubo, in his treatise on joinery and cabinet making, written at the end of the XVIIth century (1770), tells us that tables are all composed of a top, and of one or more feet which are either fixed, or movable, or folding. Roubo divides tables into three classes, eating tables, writing tables, and playing tables, and proceeds to give directions for the making of each. On going back to ancient civilizations, we find that the Egyptian tables were round, square, or oblong. The former were generally used for meals, and consisted of a circular flat top supported, like the monopodium of the Romans, on a single central leg or shaft, or by the figure of a man intended to represent a captive. Large tables had usually three or four legs, but some were made with solid sides, and though generally of wood, the Egyptian tables were often made of metal or of stone.

In the museum of Naples there is an antique marble table of Graeco-Roman work, supported by a centaur in full relief at one end, and at the other by a sea monster involving a shipwrecked mariner in the folds of his tail, with indications of waves around the body. Other Roman tables of large dimensions had three, four, or five supports composed of sphinxes, lions, etc. The Roman triclinium was arranged in such a manner that one side of the table was left free for the service, and in the traditional representations of the Last Supper the Saviour and his disciples are always shown seated on one side of the table only while the other is left free.

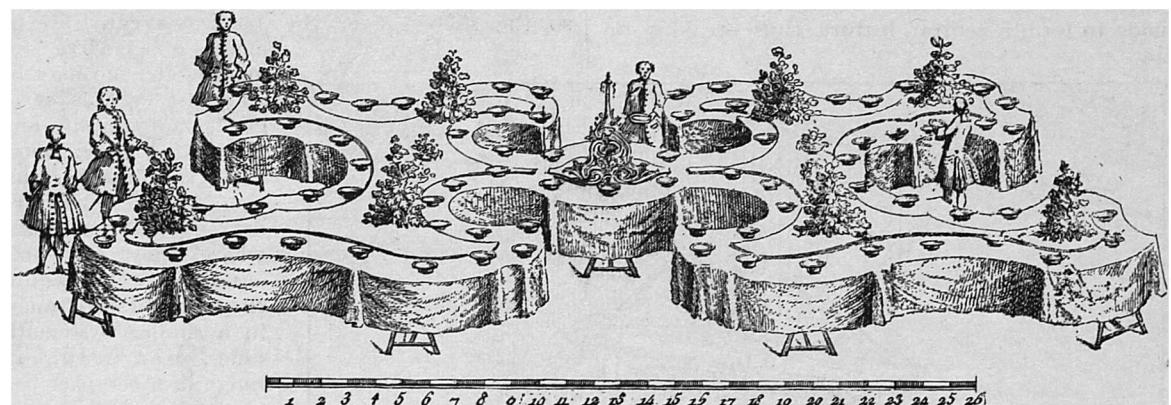
In medieval times chests are used as tables especially for games such as chess, for instance, while the dining-table is placed on trestles and the whole packed away after the meal, to leave the dining-hall clear. In the XIVth century the modern solid table came into fashion. A fine



ROUND TABLE OF FOURTEENTH CENTURY.

In the middle ages the general disposition of the dining-table was taken from those of the abbeys and convents, and it was precisely the disposition still maintained in the English universities at the present day. The principal table was laid on a raised platform or floor at the upper end of the dining hall, and received the name of "high table," a term still in use at Oxford. The guests sat on one side of the table only; the place of honor was in the center, and the principal personage of the dinner sat under a canopy or cloth of state hung up for the occasion, or under a permanent panelled canopy curving outwards.

In the XVth century the art of table decoration began to develop, especially in France. The dining table was laid in the largest room in the chateau, and the center was covered with immense surlouts representing fortified towers made of pastry, and whole towns of paste and sugar covered with gilt and silver, and fitted with living birds and animals. Under Louis XIV., table decoration reaches the height of sumptuousness, and the banquets of the king were remarkable for the surlouts, "a new art," says Brillat Savarin, "which combined painting and sculpture, and presented to the eye an agreeable picture and sometimes a site appropriate to the circumstance

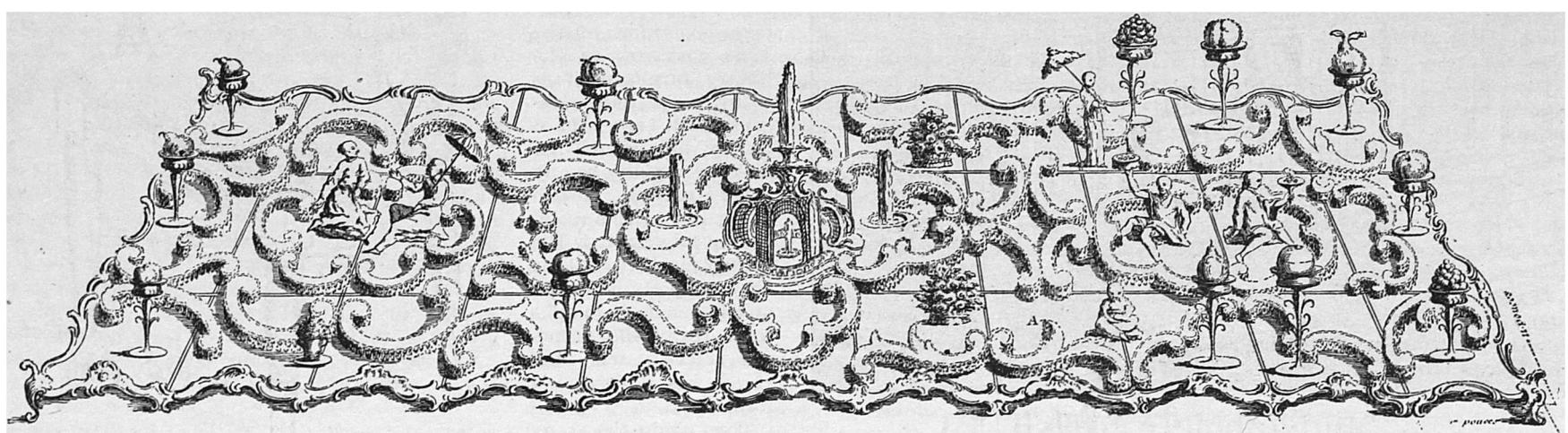


ARRANGEMENT OF TABLE IN XVIIIth CENTURY.

octagon table of this epoch is still preserved in the Chapter-house of Salisbury Cathedral. As for the round tables so famous in the romances of chivalry, they are perhaps not to be conceived as resembling the round tables of the New York club houses, but as a hollow and broken circle as shown in the accompanying cut taken from a MS. of the XIVth century. We may be sure that the quaint old magnates sitting around this hollow circle were most conveniently served by the little pages who are seen discreetly attentive in the centre.

or the hero of the fête. In these surlouts the culinary art achieved, the grand and even the gigantic."

Speaking of the same epoch, the Marquis de Cussy, another celebrated gastronomist, says: "The cookery of the reign of Louis XIV. was careful, sumptuous, and tolerably fine. At the court the eating was good, if not brilliant; nevertheless it was rather the epoch of table decoration than of epicurean sensualism." The same genial writer says elsewhere: "It is to the gentle authority of the Regent, *le bon régent qui gâta tout*



XVIIIth CENTURY DESERT LAID ON GLASS TRAY.

en France, to the brilliancy of his suppers; it is to the cooks that he produced, paid, and treated so royally and politely, that the French were indebted for the exquisite cookery of the XVIIIth century. That cookery, at once erudite and simple, which we possess in its perfection, was an immense, rapid, and unexpected development. The whole century, or rather all the delicacy and wit of the century, were seduced by it. Far from hampering or obscuring the intellect, this cuisine full of raciness awakened it; all serious and productive affairs were discussed and carried on at table. French conversation arrived at perfection at table. The exquisite cookery that was introduced by the Regent and was continued by men like Condé and Soubise, often lent a piquant vivacity to the talk of Montesquieu, of Voltaire, of Diderot, of Helvetius, of d'Alembert, of Dullos, of Vauvenargues. But their genius paid for their suppers by giving them immortality. What delicious evenings people passed at that time, evenings that were always too short, although they were prolonged far into the night! What a charming and amiable civilization, and what pretty verses, and views, and ideas it produced! Yes, it was in the XVIIIth century that French society effaced all other civilized societies." A contemporary of these *petite soupers*, Grimm the author of the famous *Correspondance littéraire* questions very much whether "the sumptuousness of the Roman tables could enter into any comparison with the studied refinement of the French."

With the menus and composition of the delicious cuisine of the Regency we are acquainted, thanks to several special treatises, notably to Menon's *Soupers de la cour*, as well as to the memoirs of the time. Thanks also to contemporary technical treatises we know all about the tables of the XVIIIth century; in his *Art du menuisier ébéniste*, Roubo tells us that "eating tables are not susceptible of any decoration; they consist simply of several planks of pine or some other light wood joined together with tongue and groove, and bound with oak at the ends. These tables, or rather these table tops, are almost all of one shape, that is to say, a parallelogram larger or smaller according to the number of covers. Formerly eating tables were made round or oval, but at present these forms are little used. The size of tables is determined, as I have just said, by the number of guests, to each of whom ought to be attributed at least two feet of room, or better still, three feet, especially when there are many ladies at a meal, because their dresses take up much more room than those of men."

Roubo calculates his small, medium, and large tables on the basis of the minimum of 2 feet for each cover. His small table for four persons is 3½ feet x 2½ feet; for six persons 4 feet x 3½; for eight persons 6 feet x 4 feet; for ten persons 6 feet x 5 feet. When a larger number of guests had to be accommodated, recourse was had to leaves and flaps, called *ravanges*, and to composite tables. Grand feasts were always served on composite tables. Here we may again quote Roubo, who sums up the practices of the 18th century when he says: "Large tables are those which can not only accommodate a large number of guests, but also the middle of which is large enough to hold a *surtout de décoration*, either of flowers, sweet-meats, etc., which, with the number of covers given, determines precisely the size of these tables, on the principle that there should be 2 feet of room around the *dormant* or plateau which forms the basis of the decorative centre piece. As these tables are ordinarily very large, they are made up of a number of tables joined together with tongue and groove and held by clamps placed at intervals. These tables are placed as solidly as possible on trestles in such a manner that the trestles may be about a foot inside from the edge of the table so as not to inconvenience those who are seated around."

"Besides the large tables I have just mentioned," continues Roubo, "there are also hollow tables, commonly termed horse-shoe tables, either with the upper end round or forming simply an elbow. Both these tables are very convenient, inasmuch as the service can be performed from the

inside without interfering with those who are seated round. Their only disadvantage is that they can only receive artificial surtouts of moderate size, which is in my opinion no great misfortune, for in point of fact the enormous surtouts with which the tables of the great are loaded serve only to render the waiting more difficult and even inconvenient and to obstruct the view of all the guests who can, only with difficulty and maneuvering, see the other side of the table." The breadth of Roubo's horse-shoe table is three feet, and the height of all his eating tables 27 to 28 inches.

To conclude our brief review of the "horizontal surfaces raised above the ground" that have been used for the purposes of eating, we will turn to a rare volume called *Le Cannaméliste Français*, published at Nancy in 1761 by Gilliers, head butler or *chef d'office* and distiller to King Stanislaus. *Le Cannaméliste* is one of the very few books existing that give practical directions for serving a table, so far as the dessert at least is concerned. It is a big volume treating of the art of preserving fruit and making all kinds of things in sugar, all kinds of sweet-meats and refreshing

these tables are all composed of composite tops keyed on trestles according to the directions given by Roubo.

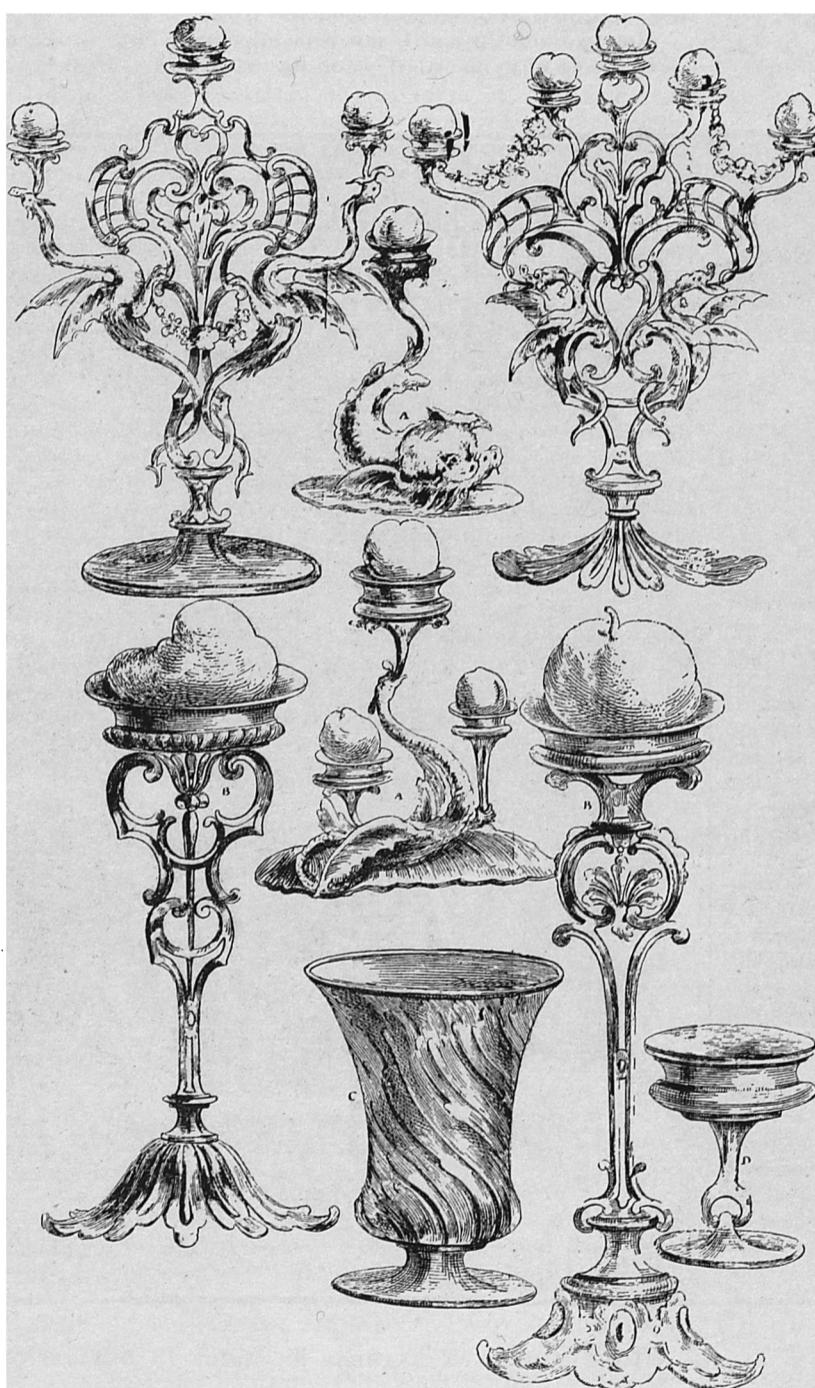
Gilliers, however, recommends the leaving of a space of 2½ feet around the *dormant* in the embellishment and decoration of which nothing is to be spared. Indeed the object of his whole book is to teach the officer how to make figures of sugar, how to lay out parks and gardens with grass plots of chenille and walks of nompairelle to imitate gravel, how to arrange pillars and trophies and rocallies and silver ware and crystal on trays, or *dormants* of wood or of mirror glass, surrounded by borders of Sevres porcelain, and populated by quaint little Frenchified Chinese figures.

The plates in Gilliers' book are all the more valuable as we have very few iconographic representations of XVIIIth century people at table. There is one, however, that deserves mention here, namely, the water color by Moreau le Jeune, No. 1196 in the gallery of the Louvre, depicting a "Fête donnée à Luciennes, le 28 Décembre 1771," and showing the dining-room of Mme. du Barry in the pavilion of Luciennes. The room is an oblong octagon, white and gold. In the middle of the ceiling, the ends of which are occupied by gilt caissons, are painted clouds, an Olympus, and swarms of cupids. The walls of white marble, are divided into compartments by Corinthian pilasters, with bases and capitals of gilt bronze. Between the capitals, bas-reliefs, framed in gold, display cupids, the portrait of Louis XV., and the combined arms of the king and of Mme. du Barry. Four tribunes, destined for musicians, are full of ladies leaning over the balustraded balconies. The spaces between the columns are occupied by mirrors that reflect and repeat to infinity the light of the hanging lustres and illuminate four marble statues of women standing on pedestals engarlanded with gilt bronze. Around the table, surrounded by lookers on, behind the round-backed arm-chairs and the tie-wigs of the guests, each chatting with his neighbor, the valets, the waiters, the servants pass to and fro in their gay livery. In the centre of the table arise the floriated pillars and dome roofs of a fantastic temple of friendship or gastronomy, a masterpiece of the *cannaméliste's* art, and the whole table is radiant with crystal and silver, with *cordons bleus*, with diamonds, and with the smiles of the guests. It is the picture of a brilliant fête of a gaiety and variety of color which our modern costumer prevents us from approaching much less rivaling.

This question of table decoration deserves special and detailed treatment, for it is in reality a branch of decorative art, and as such it has a right to consideration in this journal. For the present, however, my only object is to call the attention of my contemporaries to the fact that in the matter of the table and its general arrangement we are not getting on so well as we think, and that we are ages behind the delicately voluptuous service of the XVIIIth century, with its cooking composed only, as a writer of the time has said, "of reasoned quintessences freed from all *terrestréite*," the service of that exquisite reign

of Louis XV. when, as Gilliers says, "although one be with the army one nevertheless needs good cheer," and so he recommends his military butler to make good provision of dry and liquid preserves and to simplify his utensils as much as possible, taking only gracefully formed wooden plateaux with chiseled bronze mounts and baskets of colored and gilt wicker wherein to serve his fruit, is an amusing officer's campaign dessert.

My object in referring the reader to the Roman triclinium, to the medieval round table, and above all to the French tables of the XVIIIth century, where it will be observed by the way that the decoration of the *dormant* is generally kept low and open except in the case of banquets of 40 or 50 covers, is simply to help him to protest against the dogmatists and their traditions, to show him that a dining-table need not be either round or square or oblong, that the waiting need not be executed from behind, and that convenience combined with elegance and studied refinement, may produce a variety of gay and amusing table decorations, of which few of us have an idea.



FRENCH SILVER FRUIT STANDS, XVIIITH CENTURY

drinks; a volume where, in the midst of copper-plate engravings representing desserts as if embroidered in chenille, you find recipes for pomengranate jam, syrup of jessamine, candy of violets, roses and gonquils, odorous and perfumed dishes that remind one of the sweet-meats of a feast in the Arabian Nights. Gillier's book is a complete manual of the delicate eating, of the art of feasting, in the reign of Louis XV.

On the matter of tables Gilliers has more fantastic notions than any of his predecessors. He does not even hint at the classification of round, square, oblong and horse-shoe forms; the table he intimates may have any form you please, and in a cut which we reproduce he shows us a table of most capricious and amusing contour. The plan of half the table will show the arrangement: A is the centre; 10 are the plates; 11 the dormant or plateau, with its sections shown, and R the place of the chairs. Gilliers gives a dozen plans of tables of capricious arabesque forms with minute geometrical directions for cutting out the tops and the corresponding dormants, for as will be seen